

# Donizetti at Ivry

## Notes from a tragic coda

Alexander Weatherson

On a freezing February day in 1846 Donizetti clambered awkwardly into his carriage aided by his servant who sat down beside him, his nephew Andrea took the seat facing, they were on their way to Vienna – or so the stricken composer had been told. Luggage was placed all around them. Another carriage followed containing Dr Philippe Ricord the famous *syphiligrapher*. After a meandering digression for three hours they turned under an ornamental arch in a leafy suburb. Donizetti had come to the end of his journey.



He had arrived at the maison de santé founded in 1828 by the *aliéniste* Jean-Étienne Esquirol (1772-1840), usually called the Maison Esquirol, with an address of 7 rue de Seine in the outer-Parisian conurbation of Ivry-sur-Seine. This secluded establishment was now in the hands of his nephew, another psychiatrist, Jules-Étienne-Frumental Mitivié (1796-1871) and an upmarket refuge for the shelter of people in the public eye – or rich enough – and all diagnosed as suffering from mental illness.

Under the supervision of Dr Ricord (1800-1889), Donizetti had been discreetly hidden away



Dr. Philippe Ricord

This was a period, most especially in France, of great advance in the understanding and treatment of cerebral disease, these doctors – among the most celebrated in the world - were renowned not just for their science but also for their gentle and sympathetic approach to treatment. The régime at the Maison Esquirol resembled that of a health spa, a collection of pavilions dispersed throughout a park with a central hospital more-or-less in the guise of a country house. It was a psychiatric environment that patently rejected the barbarism of the recent past and was soon to be enhanced in France by the genius of Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-93) who paired fundamental studies in neurology, in clinical discipline and various monumental diagnostic topics, with works on hysteria and hypnotism, the latter leading - if in no way intentionally – to the age of Freud and psychoanalysis.

Drs Mitivié and Ricord, together with Dr Gabriel Andral (1797-1876)<sup>1</sup>, had examined the still perfectly articulate Donizetti on their momentous visit to his bedside early in August 1845 at the Hotel Manchester when the gravity of the illustrious composer's condition had become apparent. After a period of monitoring and obvious decline the journey to Ivry had become a quasi-inevitable sequel. Once inside, he was told there had been an accident of some kind outside those monumental gates, that something had been stolen, that providentially he had found himself outside "a pleasant inn" but his long-time servant was mysteriously whisked away and when he tried to leave after some fraught days of disquiet – when he attempted to find his way to an exit - he was restrained. All kinds of confabulation was thrust at him, and it was from here, in the days that followed, that the distraught maestro sent his heartbreaking appeals for help - to be released - for friends to come to his assistance - scribbling messages to all and sundry, to Antonio Dolci in Italy, to Zélie de Coussy, to the Austrian Ambassadors the *contessa* Appony ...

*“Pietà, Pietà, M’hanno arestato; perché? Il servo, pare che fosse un ladro. – Tenetevi la carrozza; ma, arrestarmi anco me?”*

panicky, dreadful and confused missives on desperate scraps of paper in a mixture of Italian and French that were never delivered.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Alexander Weatherson *Dr Gabriel Andral: a Footnote* [in] Donizetti Society Journal 7 (Bergamo 2002) 23-27 as well as its French counterpart: *Un lotois au chevet de Donizetti* [in] Bulletin de la Société des Études du Lot CXXIV avril-juin 2003, 145-148

Who had decided upon this incarceration? It seems to have come about as a result of a further examination on 26 January 1846 by Drs Mitivié and Ricord together with another psychiatrist Dr Juste-Louis Calmeil (1798-1895), but who it was or what it was that gave their clinical judgement the force of law and obliged him to be transferred to Ivry (as so it would later transpire) is anyone's guess. Clearly, however, the all-powerful *Préfet* of the Paris Police, Gabriel Delessert (1786-1853) had had a hand in the proceedings. Who suggested the venue? Everyone who has seen the dim photographs printed on page 42 of the commemorative volume printed in celebration of the centenary exhibition of 1897<sup>2</sup> will remember a tiny view of the park and a pointless view of the chapel. But who took the actual decision for his detention is not clear at all. Nor do we know who made the financial dispensation for this confinement. All that is certain is that his accommodation cost 500 francs a month,<sup>3</sup> and that his banker Auguste de Coussy paid the bill for a stay which was reassuringly comfortable: a "*suite of three rooms, opening on to a garden*".

How was Donizetti actually treated in this institution? Everyday attention seems to have been in the hands of Dr Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours (1804-1884), a pupil of Esquirol. The treatment he received can only be conjectural, nothing in the way of records has survived. Philippe Ricord was renowned for providing bold therapeutic programmes especially for secondary and tertiary forms of syphilis: mercury for secondary syphilis, potassium iodide – administered internally – for the treatment of tertiary syphilis. He was credited with the invention of a "*Ricord tea with iodine*" and the use of a "*Neapolitan unguent*" - a blend of mercury and balm which had to be rubbed-in. These medicaments, whatever horror they may provoke in the twenty-first century were pacific methods of approaching a condition that had witnessed mindless brutality in earlier years, a variety of civilised specifics in accordance with his seminal *Traité pratique des maladies vénériennes* of 1838 that had changed the outlook of the world upon such treatment. The famous maestro was certainly handled with great care by the famous doctor. The personal supervision of such an important physician gave complete assurance and irrespective of the dismay of Donizetti's friends and contemporaries, his treatment - whatever it may have been - had its successes, however fleeting.

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<sup>2</sup> Various authors: *Gaetano Donizetti/Numero unico nel primo centenario della sua nascita 1797-1897* (Bergamo 1897), 42

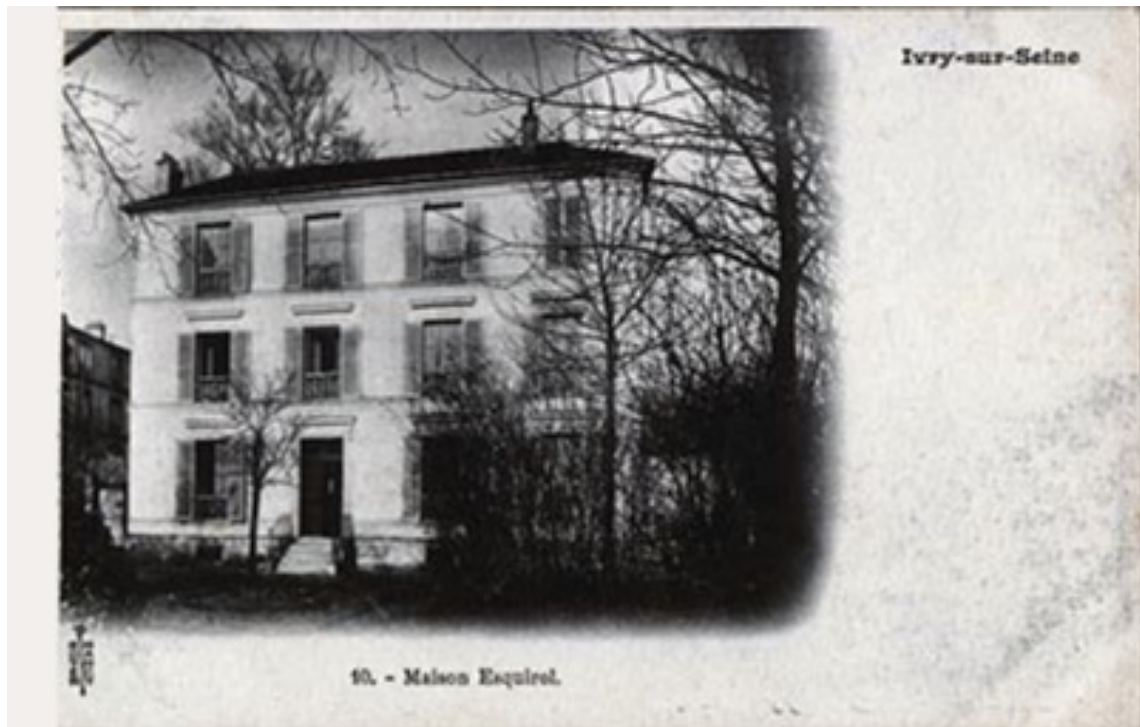
<sup>3</sup> Letter of Baron Eduard von Lannoy to Giuseppe Donizetti 26 January 1847, Zavadini 152

There is no actual reason for disbelieving (especially in the light of Andrea Donizetti's rabid fear of his uncle's covey of female admirers – or lovers – mistresses – besotted friends or whatever other role flawed history has allotted to them) the account of the *gräfin* Sophie von Löwenstein that she had walked and talked lucidly with Donizetti in the garden at Ivry on the one visit she was permitted. Perhaps she did exaggerate, she was infatuated, distinctly unbalanced herself, but her account probably has a nucleus of truth in that his condition had its ups-and-downs for several months. A stream of visitors was shocked by his appearance, by the sad shadow that remained of his brilliant intelligence, by his changed affect and vanished musical genius, but there were no complaints of his care, his clothes, or of the attention accorded to him by the staff. He had a new servant and there were other servants around. A few of the things he said made it clear that he was far from unaware of his dire condition but alas he became more and more bodily deformed as his mental state vegetated, a condition for which there was no treatment whatsoever.

What remains materially of this establishment? Two postcards survive, the first of a pair of detached pavilions (which perhaps postdate Donizetti)



The second, a view of the main building, modestly domestic but undoubtedly of the correct period with its short flight of steps, slightly unkempt vegetation and prim array of shutters..



But they have all vanished. Those monumental gates which saw a succession of famous names, together with the arch of such tragic import, have long gone. Despite Andrea Donizetti's reluctance to allow visitors to see his uncle a number of resonant personalities of the day walked under that arch and along that sad avenue to the house we can see in the distance. It was not really such a long trip from Paris: Michael William Balfe, Teodoro Ghezzi, his librettists Royer and Vaëz, Michele Accursi, the great tenor Gilbert Louis Duprez who sang to him (there was a piano in his room we know because Duprez recounts how Donizetti tried to play it), Francesco Florimo and of course Madame Zélie de Coussy, this last to Andrea's impotent fury on innumerable occasions, alone or with her husband and her daughter.

The Maison Esquirol, once hidden away from intrusive eyes stood close to where today the Ivry Town Hall now stands, near the railway station with its restless influx of commuters that no longer even hints at any tranquil refuge from everyday life. Everything the composer could have seen has disappeared. The therapeutic establishment lasted until 1949 or so, retaining most of its layout and philosophy to the last under a succession of psychiatric banners. It was still a place to hide away embarrassingly ill people in the world of artists. The avant-garde dramatist,

poet and theatre director, the inventor of the Theatre of Cruelty, Antonin Artaud, died in the establishment exactly one hundred years after Donizetti, in 1948. But now where once were glades of trees is a glaring red-brick edifice of 1950's egalitarian facture that covers most of the site. A miniscule scrap of greenery from the park struggles to breathe in the guise of a politicised communal garden. The *cit  Maurice-Thorez*, designed by the architects Henri and Robert Chevallier, built between 1952 and 1953, covers the area and is listed as belonging to the "*Patrimoine du 20<sup>eme</sup> si cle*" by the Ministry of Culture.



The site of Donizetti's penultimate French refuge has been surreally metamorphosed into cliffs of flats of fourteen floors, blatantly red, to witness an Ivry bent on a communally vibrant but sadly less melodious cultural identity.